

Successful Delegation: Why It Matters and How To Do It

By Jo Smith

"Learning how to delegate is not only about maximizing your own productivity and value; it is also about maximizing the productivity of your staff. Your job as a manager is to develop people.

Delegation is the means that you use to bring out the very best in the people that you have."

Brian Tracy

Delegation is a critical skill and practice for both you and your firm. Effective delegation is essential to leverage your firm's current talent and guarantee its future sustainability. Furthermore, it improves productivity, retention, and profitability. Yet, surprisingly few firms teach delegation skills, leaving it to individuals to learn from their seniors or by their own trial and error. One of several flaws in this system is that many seniors are themselves poor delegators. The result is that many employees neither achieve their own potential, nor learn to leverage the potential of others—a serious waste of individual and firm talent.

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Whether you're delegating to accomplish firm goals, teaching your team how to delegate, or learning to delegate for the betterment of your own career, begin by considering the following questions:

What are the benefits of delegation? In addition to improving the firm's productivity, retention, and profitability as described above, successful delegation will free up your time to focus on what you do best and enjoy most. It will allow you

to make the highest and best use of your talent for your own career advancement and satisfaction, as well as for the benefit of your firm.

What work should you keep? Keep critical work that you and only you can do, but don't neglect to train one or more back-up people to step in if or when you're unavailable for a brief or extended period of time. Keep the work you love to do, but don't use this as an excuse to avoid growth. As long as you continue to challenge yourself, doing work you love increases your job satisfaction and plays to your natural strengths. Keep the work you do best, using your highest talents for your own satisfaction and the benefit of your firm.

What work should you delegate? When you're ready to advance, begin to delegate repetitious work. Don't let your ego prevent you from delegating work that others can do as well—or better—than you. Delegate work that others can and should be taught to do, work that provides appropriate learning opportunities. Delegate tasks with long deadlines that provide ample time for learning. Just as it's advisable to keep work that uses your strengths and talents, delegate work that best uses the strengths and natural talents of others.

What work should you stop doing? Look closely at the work you do. Is there work that doesn't need to be done at all, that achieves no consequential benefit? You might be surprised to discover some busy work that you've continued out of habit, but can now be eliminated. Stop doing it!

When you've concluded that a project is suitable for delegation, the following steps will help you delegate well:

1. Understand that delegating to a less-experienced employee or one you haven't worked with before will initially require more time than doing the work yourself. Recognize that you're making an investment in the future--yours, the employee's and your firm's.

2. Pick the right person. Match the work to the appropriate person based on skills, interests, and stage of development, rather than handing it off to the first person who rounds the corner. (You wouldn't do that, would you?) Take the time to know the people you delegate to, or who you plan to delegate to, so you can assign work that enhances their career growth while meeting the needs of your firm. If your firm has identified core requirements for particular roles or career paths, match people and projects accordingly.

3. Provide an overview of the project and how the individual's work fits into the larger picture of your work. This will help the individual meet the needs of the immediate project and learn how to take responsibility for larger portions of future projects.

4. When first working with an individual, provide suggestions or an outline about how to get started. As

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the person becomes more experienced, give fewer initial suggestions, instead asking him or her to offer ideas and outline a plan to proceed. If you foresee a problem, rather than immediately pointing it out, ask “what if” questions that will help him or her recognize the potential problem.

5. Provide the individual with any necessary resources and authority to complete his or her work.

6. Agree on a communication plan and timetable. Tell the person when and how you want an update, first draft and/or finished project. Advise him or her to come to you at any time with questions or problems. Be very clear about your expectations and build in time for review, feedback, and re-work.

7. Review the work with the employee. Provide feedback and instruction relating to necessary corrections or improvements. If you must make corrections yourself (perhaps because you didn't build enough re-work time into the project), review and explain your corrections. DO NOT make changes without explaining them to the employee. If you do, the experience will be disheartening and you will miss a significant opportunity to help him or her gain knowledge and confidence.

8. Provide final feedback, including both positive and constructive, about the employee's performance as well as product. Did the employee provide timely communications? Did he or she ask intelligent questions, make well-reasoned decisions? Was the employee responsive to

suggestions or corrections? DO NOT overlook substantive performance or product problems. DO begin and end your feedback with positive comments and, where possible, outweigh critical feedback with positive feedback by a ratio of four or five to one.

9. Inform the employee about the outcome of the project and his or her role in that outcome.

10. Accept responsibility for failed projects and use them as teaching moments.

11. Give ample recognition for successful work.

12. Say “Thank you.”

Finally, be patient with yourself and others as you learn to delegate and/or as you enter into new delegating relationships. It will initially take more time, but effective delegation is critical to your success. Done well, delegation will result in better work product, improved efficiency, and greater satisfaction for you, your staff, and your firm.

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